From the Editor: Introduction, Definitions, and Historiography: What Is Atlantic History?
Author(s): Alison Games
Reviewed work(s):
Source: *OAH Magazine of History*, Vol. 18, No. 3, The Atlantic World (Apr., 2004), pp. 3-7
Published by: Organization of American Historians
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/25163675
Accessed: 04/03/2012 01:02

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

*Organization of American Historians* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *OAH Magazine of History*.

http://www.jstor.org

# Introduction, Definitions, and Historiography: What is Atlantic History?

*Alison Games*

What is Atlantic history and what does it have to offer those who teach the history of the geographic region that became the United States? This issue of the *OAH Magazine of History* is dedicated to a field of study with neither a single definition nor even generally accepted chronological parameters, a field so inchoate and so elusive that although its practitioners debate particular issues vigorously, the field as a whole has no overarching points of historiographic contention. This issue marks something of a departure from other issues that strive to sharpen readers' focus on emerging problems and controversies in established areas of specialization while suggesting innovative ways to teach these subjects. Instead, this particular issue showcases the range of approaches contained within a newly revitalized field of which United States and, more broadly, North American history, comprises only one small portion.

"Europe supported by Africa and America," from volume two of John Gabriel Stedman's *Narrative, of a Five Year Expedition* (London, 1796. Image courtesy of the Lilly Library, Indiana University Bloomington.)

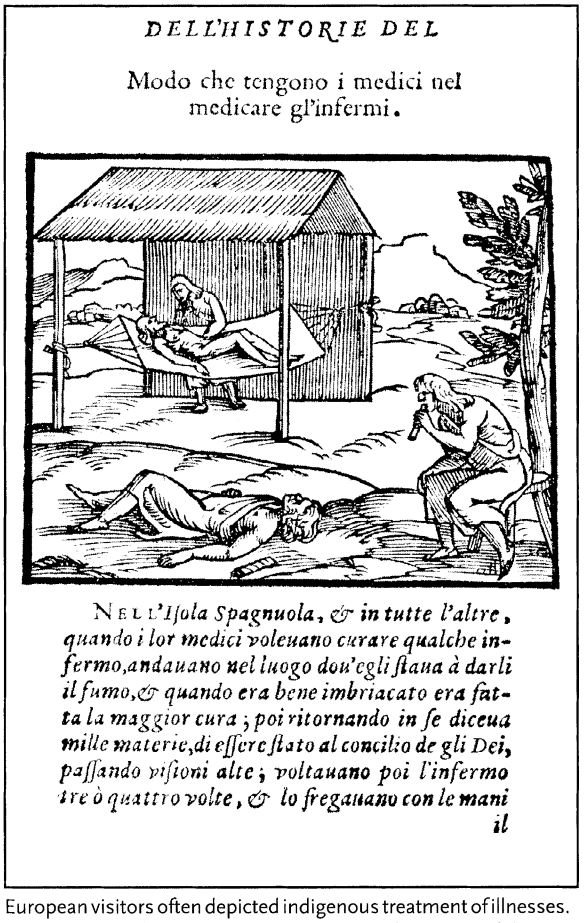
Atlantic history is most literally the study of a geographic region: the four continents that surround the Atlantic Ocean and the people contained therein. It especially focuses on those people whose societies were transformed by the intersection of the four continents after Christopher Columbus's momentous voyage in 1492. These societies are not necessarily places along the Atlantic Ocean itself—Peru, for example, or the western coast of North America, or the region surrounding the Great Lakes. Places and people on the Pacific coast of the Americas were engaged in processes originating from the Atlantic, regardless of their actual geographic location. Africans who lived hundreds of miles from the Atlantic coast were nonetheless ensnared in the slave trade and its varied economic, social, and political repercussions, while diets around the world were altered by the new products of the Americas. Many American Indians found their world transformed by pathogens, animals, and plants well before they laid eyes on a European. Nor is Atlantic history only about the literal points of contact—ports, traders, or migrants, for example—but rather about explaining transformations, experiences, and events in one place in terms of conditions deriving from that place's location in a large, multifaceted, interconnected world.

If its beginning point is relatively fixed, Atlantic history's terminus is more fluid. European and African trade interactions in the mid-fifteenth century and especially Columbus's 1492 voyage generally provide a good starting point and the age of revolution and independence, through 1825, marks one possible ending. The abolition of slavery—in the western hemisphere by 1888, but not until the middle of the twentieth century in much of Atlantic Africa—provides another. Within the space of these four centuries and these four continents, historians who adopt an Atlantic perspective explore commonalities and convergences, seeking larger patterns derived from the new interactions of people around, within, and across the Atlantic.

At the same time, the Atlantic did not form a monolithic region. The Atlantic world may be a coherent unit of analysis, but that does not mean that it was singular, uniform, or harmonious. While people in the Atlantic world might have shared common ordeals that recurred over time in different places, there were also marked variations. Indeed,

there is no single perspective on the Atlantic, nor a single narrative that emerges. David Armitage has identified three different types of Atlantic history: "circum-Atlantic history," which takes the Atlantic experience as a whole and is the main thrust of this issue; "trans-Atlantic history," which emphasizes a comparative approach; and "cis-Atlantic history," which looks at a particular place within an Atlantic context (1). Atlantic history can be taught fruitfully from any vantage point, through any number of approaches, and the history of a single place—a colony, state, or nation—can likewise be taught within an Atlantic perspective, as Dennis J. Maika's lesson plan below demonstrates.

Not all subjects are Atlantic in scope; not all questions require answers that include the entire Atlantic world. An Atlantic perspective should only be invoked if the Atlantic offers a logical unit of analysis. But for those who seek answers and explanations in this larger regional context, Atlantic history provides an approach that requires the rejection of national histories. Atlantic history assumes that explanations for events in one place might lie elsewhere. The essays in this volume illustrate the advantages of this larger perspective—explaining the disintegration of the great Atlantic empires by exploring the confluence of factors in the Americas that shaped disease and warfare; or exploring migration to Africa in the context of British abolition and the solidification of racialized citizenship during the creation of the United States; or examining political culture in the eighteenth century through the rise of the coffee house, itself a product of Atlantic commodities and labor configurations. In each case, in essays and lesson plans, the contributors to this issue have looked beyond the national borders of a single political entity to explain important transformations. Atlantic history, then, privileges history without borders.



European visitors often depicted indigenous treatment of illnesses. This interest reflected in part the increased frequency of disease among Indian populations. (From Girolama Benzoni, *La Historia del Mondo Nuova* [Venice, 1572].)

Atlantic history has come into its own by any number of measures. Although the existence of an Atlantic perspective dates from the middle of the twentieth century, the emergence of a cadre of scholars for whom Atlantic approaches have offered useful explanatory power is a distinguishing feature of the past two decades (2). These scholars overwhelmingly tend to represent particular fields—colonial history, the African diaspora, economic history, and, increasingly, British history. For colonial historians accustomed to juggling multiple perspectives and to integrating European and American history, Atlantic perspectives are a natural predilection. Historians of colonial North America have been particularly aggressive in their pursuit of an Atlantic context, which has the added benefit of helping them extricate early American history from the shadow of the new United States and the nationalism that infuses its history. Greatly bolstered by the support of Harvard University's International Seminar on the History of the Atlantic World <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~atlantic/index.html>, under the direction of Bernard Bailyn, historians engaged in different aspects of Atlantic history find regular opportunities to present research in seminars, colloquia, and workshops. A new interdisciplinary journal, *Atlantic Studies*, will soon provide another forum for research. Colleges and universities now advertise for positions in Atlantic history for both introductory and advanced classes. At Georgetown University, for example, Atlantic History (History 3) fulfills one half of the college's General Education requirement in history. Graduate students in history at some institutions can pursue degrees in Atlantic history.

What can Atlantic history offer those who specialize in United States or North American history? The essays and lesson plans contained here hope to answer that question. They illustrate the explanatory power of answers to fundamental historical questions—about migration, conquest, revolution, consumption, cultural transfer, and the transmission of knowledge—that require an Atlantic approach. The essays and lesson plans here are not explicitly focused on the United States, nor do they convey a story that is in any way uniquely American, although the story might be uniquely Atlantic. One important dimension of Atlantic approaches are the ways in which they challenge a history of national exceptionalism of any of the different nations within the Atlantic. Set within the Atlantic World, the United States, in both its colonial and early national periods, shared more with other colonies and new nations in the Americas than it differed. The international perspective of Atlantic history is reflected in the fields of specialization of the contributors to this issue. The historians gathered here research and teach in the fields of world history, environmental history, early modern European history, the African diaspora, and United States, particularly early American, history. Their insights build on research in multiple languages, including Spanish, French, German, Italian, and Dutch, and in multiple archives in different countries. They bring the historiographic conventions of a number of subfields to Atlantic history, thus reinforcing the heterogeneity of the field itself.

Atlantic history privileges connections and interactions, three of which are the focus of this issue: migration, commodities, and disease. These themes offer some of the most obvious and accessible ways to explore connections around the Atlantic and to enable students to engage issues of historical and contemporary interest. They delineate the many ways in which the people of the Atlantic world were linked—by the commodities produced in one region and consumed elsewhere, by the transmission of news and culture, by networks, and

by diseases that came from far away but had an enormous impact in another part of the world.

Disease figures in J. R. McNeill's article, "Yellow Jack and Geopolitics: Environment, Epidemics, and the Struggles for Empire in the American Tropics, 1650-1825," and in Karen E. Carter's lesson plan, "Disease in the Atlantic World, 1492-1900." Both contributors explore the different ways in which epidemic diseases affected all of the populations of the Atlantic. Disease shaped the geopolitics of the Atlantic world. It facilitated conquest by Europeans, as American Indians succumbed to a range of unfamiliar and devastating diseases. Indeed, for European and indigenous commentators alike, disease was a recurring theme of the invasion of the Americas, whether by soldiers, settlers, or traders. Using an inventive true or false game and then drawing on the *Jesuit Relations*, Karen Carter focuses in particular on the havoc wreaked by smallpox among the indigenous people of New France.

If disease facilitated conquest by Europeans and helped them secure their empires, it similarly played a role in settlement patterns and, ultimately, in the dismantling of those empires. Colonial settlements, especially in southeastern North America and in the Caribbean, were shaped by the high mortality of European settlers. In the Chesapeake, decades passed before the colonial population could sustain itself without infusions of migrants, while in the Carolinas, Georgia, and the colonies of the Caribbean, colonial populations never reproduced themselves. This continued high mortality shaped colonial societies as fully as any other feature. High and differential mortality similarly shaped geopolitics. McNeill examines the differential impact of yellow fever on the African, European, and American-born populations of the western Atlantic. He argues that a number of variables converged to provide a world in which yellow fever thrived. Migration of both Europeans and Africans, the environmental transformations that sustained sugar production, imperial rivalries and military conventions all joined to create a world conducive to the *aedes aegypti* mosquito and the spread of yellow fever. In turn, yellow fever and other mosquito-born illnesses, such as malaria, shaped some of the most profound political transformations in the Atlantic world in their particular danger to European men, most notably, as McNeill illustrates, the destruction of empires and the emergence of the first two republics of the western Atlantic, the United States and Haiti.

Commodities were highly controversial. This image depicts the use of coffee and tobacco in a negative light. (From *Two Broadsides Against Tobacco* [London, 1672], page 63. Image courtesy of the Folger Shakespeare Library.)

The second overarching theme of this issue is commodities. Europeans ventured across the Atlantic and south to West and Central Africa in search of goods to trade—salt, ivory, spices, fabric, minerals such as gold and silver, and dyes. They found these commodities, but they also found many others with which they were unfamiliar. Tobacco and chocolate are two such products. Other commodities, like sugar, became more readily available in Europe and elsewhere through Atlantic conquests and environmental transformations. Europeans needed to learn how to use these new substances not just in practical terms of how to prepare and consume them, but also the social and cultural contexts in which commodities might be employed. In "Conquests of Chocolate," Marcy Norton introduces readers to the complex story of chocolate and how Europeans adopted Indian practices in their preparation and consumption of chocolate. Her essay also reminds us that then, as now, commodities were deeply controversial. Europeans did not know how to use them; they feared the possibly corrosive adaptation of Indian products and practices; and the effects of some of the more powerful substances were unknown. The more potent commodities were, the more Europeans debated their use. Then, as now, powerful narcotics were celebrated in popular songs. The English composer Thomas Weelkes (1575-1623) wrote a madrigal, a secular song, about tobacco in which he evoked in both music and lyrics the mind-spinning impact of the powerful nicotine of unprocessed tobacco and the great curative powers of the plant (3). The introduction of new commodities was often a protracted affair, and one in which Europeans learned from Indians not only the methods of production, but also the rituals of consumption. Commodities required their own spaces, their own rituals, and their own culture. Christopher Doyle focuses on the rise of the coffeehouse in his lesson plan, which also engages important questions about globalization and consumption choices that students can apply to any number of contemporary and historical issues.

The third theme of the volume is migration, which defined the Atlantic world more than any other form of connection and interaction within the region. The varied circumstances of migration shaped the emergence of cultures around the Atlantic, both through the transmission of African and European cultures and in their transformation (4). Because slavery was the subject of the April 2003 *OAH Magazine of History*, it is not featured in this issue, but the migration of enslaved Africans is certainly the dominant story of transatlantic migration, and all who teach migration in this period should be acutely aware of the striking disparity in statistics between African and European migration. Between 1600 and 1800, for example, 1,042,100 Europeans migrated to British America, including mainland and Caribbean colonies, compared to 2,333,140 Africans in the same period. The disparities are even more pronounced within the two regions of British settlement: 752,200 Europeans migrated to the mainland, compared to 287,600 Africans, while 289,900 Europeans migrated to the Caribbean, compared to 2,045,550 Africans (5). Incorporating the entire western Atlantic, the numbers continue to be striking, with 7,615,000 African captives traveling across the Atlantic to the Americas in the period before 1800, compared to 1,410,000 Europeans between 1500 and 1783 (6). Africans clearly traveled as coerced and captive laborers, but so too did Europeans, especially those from the British Isles to British

colonies, the majority of whom ventured across the Atlantic as bound laborers. People were among the most valuable commodities of the Atlantic world. So the larger story of migration across the Atlantic is one of violence and coercion, of enslavement and subordination.

Even ostensibly "voluntary" migrations were embedded in economic, political, religious, and cultural dislocation that shaped decisions to migrate. Migration patterns were also shaped by interactions that were often triangular in scope. The two essays on migration illustrate the complex web of information and experience that shaped people's decisions about travel. In "German-Speaking Immigrants in the British Atlantic World, 1680-1730," Rosalind J. Beiler uncovers the networks that furthered the migration of German-speaking people within the British Atlantic world. German-speaking people in general tended to migrate not west across the Atlantic, but rather east into central Europe. Beiler's essay explores the small minority who elected to travel west. Her research reveals complex networks, created primarily within dissenting religious circles, that permitted the circulation of information and encouraged migrants from the Holy Roman Empire to venture on a long and expensive journey to English colonies thousands of miles away.

If the United States was only one small corner of the Atlantic World, it was nonetheless for the entire modern period a place defined by the transforming convergence of people and cultures from four continents and the ocean these continents frame.

Migration is generally treated as an east to west phenomenon in United States history, but far more varied patterns were also at work. People moved frequently around the Atlantic world, from colony to colony, crossing imperial and national borders as they traveled. And they also ventured east, from the Americas to Africa and Europe. Rates of return migration for Europeans are fiendishly difficult to determine, but in the seventeenth century as much as 10 to 15 percent of migrants returned to England, and many more anticipated a return but died before achieving their goal. Nemata Blyden's essay, "Back to Africa: the Migration of New World Blacks to Sierra Leone and Liberia," highlights one such migratory flow in her survey of those Africans and people of African descent who elected to leave the Americas for Africa, specifically for the colonies of Liberia and Sierra Leone. Her essay delineates the important networks consisting of Africans and people of African descent in the United States and in Canada and British and American abolitionists, who organized the migrations that created the British colony of Sierra Leone and the American settlement of Liberia. Marion Menzin's lesson plan on migration focuses on two English travelers to the mainland colonies, but reminds us of the many variables that shaped decisions about migration and of the centrality of labor to colonial development.

Finally, Dennis J. Maika's lesson plan, "New York was Always a Global City: The Impact of World Trade on Seventeenth-Century New Amsterdam," provides a capstone to the issue by engaging a single fundamental question: What did it mean to live in a single place in the Atlantic world? He answers this question by exploring the global nature of New Amsterdam under Dutch dominion in the seventeenth century, reminding us that New York was always a place shaped by its global ties. His approach can be more generally replicated for any single place in North America, where Europeans, Indians, and Africans lived in uncomfortable and reluctant proximity, where competing empires shared contested borders, and where the heterogeneity, innovation, and hybridity of any single place were both a product and reflection of Atlantic connections and a defining attribute of American society. If the United States was only one small corner of the Atlantic world, it was nonetheless for the entire early modern period a place defined by the transforming convergence of people and cultures of four continents and the ocean these continents frame. ❑

**Endnotes**

1. David Armitage, "Three Concepts of Atlantic History," in David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick, eds., *The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 11-27.
2. See especially Bernard Bailyn, "The Idea of Atlantic History," *Itinerario* 20 (1996): 19-44.
3. Thomas Weelkes, "Come, Sirrah Jack, Ho," in Philip Ledger, ed., *The Oxford Book of English Madrigals* (London: Oxford University Press Music Department, 1978), 70-1. This song is available on numerous recordings and is generally amusing to students.
4. The ability of migrants to transfer elements of Old World cultures and ethnicities across the Atlantic is hotly debated. For these issues applied to Africans, see, for example, Paul E. Lovejoy, "Identifying Enslaved Africans in the African Diaspora," from Lovejoy, ed., *Identity in the Shadow of Slavery* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 1-29; Philip D. Morgan, "The Cultural Implications of the Atlantic Slave Trade: African Regional Origins, American Destinations and New World Developments," in David Eltis and David Richardson, eds., *Routes to Slavery: Direction, Ethnicity, and Mortality in the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (London: Frank Cass, 1997), 122-45; Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1992).
5. Alison Games, "Migration," in Armitage and Braddick, eds., *The British Atlantic World*, 41.
6. Alison Games, "The Atlantic Ocean," in Jonathan Dewald, ed., *Europe 1450-1789: Encyclopedia of the Early Modern World* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2004).

**Suggestions for further reading:**

Altman, Ida and James Horn, eds. *'To Make America': European Emigration in the Early Modern Period.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991.

Armitage, David and Michael J. Braddick, eds. *The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.

Bailyn, Bernard. "The Idea of Atlantic History." *Itinerario* 20 (1996): 19-44.

Canny, Nicholas P. and Anthony Pagden, eds. *Colonial Identity in the Atlantic World, 1500-1800.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987.

———, ed. *Europeans on the Move: Studies on European Migration, 1500-1800.* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1994.

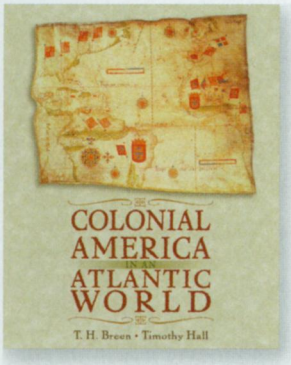
Cook, Noble David. *Born to Die: Disease and New World Conquest, 1492-1650.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Crosby, Alfred W. *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492.* Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1972.

Curtin, Philip D. *The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex: Essays in Atlantic History.* Second Edition. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
Elliott, John Huxtable. *The Old World and the New, 1492-1650.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1970.
Eltis, David. *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
Games, Alison. "History without Borders: Teaching American History in an Atlantic Context." *Indiana Magazine of History* 91 (1995): 159-78.
———. *Migration and the Origins of the English Atlantic World.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.
———. "Teaching Atlantic History." *Itinerario* 23 (1999): 162-73.
Hancock, David. *Citizens of the World: London Merchants and the Integration of the British Atlantic Community, 1735-1785.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
Karras, Alan L. and J. R. McNeill, eds. *Atlantic American Societies: From Columbus through Abolition 1492-1888.* London: Routledge, 1992.
Klooster, Wim. "The Rise and Transformation of the Atlantic World." In Wim Klooster and Alfred Padula, eds., *The Atlantic World: Essays on Slavery, Migration, and Imagination.* Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2004.
Landers, Jane G., ed. *Against the Odds: Free Blacks in the Slave Societies of the Americas.* London: Frank Cass, 1996.
Mann, Kristin and Edna G. Bay, eds. *Rethinking the African Diaspora: the Making of a Black Atlantic World in the Bight of Benin and Brazil.* London: Frank Cass, 2001.
Meinig, D. W. *The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of History.* Volume I, *Atlantic America, 1492-1800.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986.
Mintz, Syndey W. *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History.* New York: Viking, 1985.
Northrup, David. *Africa's Discovery of Europe, 1450-1850.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.
"Round Table Conference: The Nature of Atlantic History." *Itinerario* 23 (1999): 48-173.
Schwartz, Stuart B., ed. *Implicit Understandings: Observing, Reporting, and Reflecting on the Encounters Between Europeans and Other Peoples in the Early Modern Era.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
Thornton, John Kelly. *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800.* Second edition. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

*Alison Games is associate professor of history at Georgetown University. She is the author of* Migration and the Origins of the English Atlantic World *(1999), which won the 1999 Theodore Saloutos Book Award in American Immigration History from the Immigration and Ethnic History Society. She has also written articles on various aspects of the seventeenth-century Atlantic World and on teaching Atlantic history, which she offers as an introductory survey course at Georgetown.*

LONGMAN
PEARSON Longman
...for your courses in Early American history




Colonial America in an Atlantic World
T.H. Breen, *Northwestern University*
Timothy Hall, *Central Michigan University*
©2004 • 376 pages • Paper • ISBN 0-321-06181-0
This new text presents the Atlantic coast history as a story of interaction and adaptation among the peoples of the four continents, and discusses the social, political, environmental, and cultural processes set in motion by European exploration and settlement.

"*Colonial America* is a good, solid history of the colonization of North America that accurately covers the roles and contributions of Native Americans and Africans."
– Rick Pointer, *Westmont College*

"The material is very well balanced between all the European expansion in the western hemisphere, Africa, the native American populations, and the intermixing of both Europeans, Africans, and American natives."
– Tom Ray, *Wayland Baptist University*

Atlantic Lives
A Comparative Approach to Early America
Timothy J. Shannon, *Gettysburg College*
©2004 • 272 pages • Paper • ISBN 0-321-07710-5
Organized thematically, each chapter of this new reader features primary source selections that place Early American History in a comparative context with the wider Atlantic World. The selections are drawn from a wide variety of non-traditional sources, including travel narratives from West Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America.

To order examination copies–
• Web: www.ablongman.com
• E-mail: exam.copies@ablongman.com
• Fax: (617) 848-7490
• Contact your local sales representative